

Parashat Re'eh sermon

Bard Cosman, 9/3/16

[page references are to *Etz Hayim* chumash]

In 1977, the poet laureate of my home state of New Jersey wrote a brief lyric—it appeared on the B side of *The River*—which began with an astonishing hook: “Papa go to bed now; it’s getting late.” With that line, Springsteen telegraphed that *Independence Day* would be about dislocation and the rupture of normal relations. Children don’t tell their parents when to go to bed, or rather it only happens when something has turned the world upside-down. From the role reversal of parent and child, the listener is unconsciously prepared for descriptions of jarring change. The last line of *Independence Day*, “soon everything we’ve known will just be swept away,” is inevitable from the first line “Papa go to bed now; it’s getting late.”

In Western culture, based in Athens and Jerusalem, we are exquisitely attuned to *any* deviation from expected relations between parents and children. The model of the loving, giving parent and the dutiful child is central to culture and to religion. And that centrality is certainly more of Jerusalem than it is of Athens.

This week’s Torah portion, Parashat Re’eh, continues Moses’s Deuteronomic summary of Judaism, and in it Moses harps constantly, if often obliquely, on the Jewish child-parent relation, as if it’s the most important thing. We’ll start on the top of page 1083 [Deut 16:11], where Moses instructs us to worship at a central location. Whom should you bring to that central place to give sacrifice? Your sons and daughters, your male and female slaves, the Levite within your gates, plus strangers, widows, and orphans. Who’s missing from that expanded household list? Mom and Dad are missing. But we are so conditioned to what’s “normal”—that is, Abrahamic or Judaic family relations—that we’re not surprised. The active party in the family is the parent, and we take that for granted.

Another example is on top of page 1070 [Deut 13:7], where Moshe Rabbeinu issues a dire prohibition against apostasy. If a family member suggests you worship another god, then you should not only politely decline, but also be the first to stone that loved one to death. We’re familiar with this hyper-aggressive approach to apostasy from some elements of Islam today, and we may recoil at finding it in our own Torah, but we shouldn’t be too shocked: while heathens pose a mild challenge for any religion, apostates are always an existential threat, and existential threats elicit overwhelming force.

But let's look more closely at the list of household inciters to apostasy you are encouraged to kill (we are still on page 1070 [Deut 13:7]): it's your half-brother, your son or daughter, your wife, and your best friend. Someone missing from that list, no? Again, it's Mom and Dad. To be sure, it's unlikely that they'd apostasize, especially given the way Moses defines alien gods—gods whom you and *your fathers* have not known. But let's just suppose Mom or Dad decides to convert, and asks the kids to join them in the new religion: what would Moses suggest the kids do—go along, or pick up a stone?

And here's a final bit of oblique parenting advice from Uncle Moses: it's at the bottom of page 1074 [Deut 14:21], and it's disguised as a dietary law: *Lo tivashel g'di b'chalev imo*; You shall not boil a kid in its mother's milk. That generates the kashrut prohibition against mixing milk and meat, and it sounds like a *chok*—an unexplainable regulation—if you ever heard one. But this too is about the child-parent relation. Ramban says that cooking meat in milk involves cruelty, and we avoid cruelty because we are a 'holy people to Hashem.'

How exactly does mixing milk and meat involve cruelty and unholiness? To set up this explanation, let's look at two other well-known Torah rules involving a baby animal and its mother: one says you can't slaughter a cow and her calf on the same day, and the other says you should scare away a mother bird before plundering her nest. They might seem to be about not forcing a parent to witness the death of her child, but these rules are more potent and coherent when seen from the child's point of view. If the mother is taken away—scared away, or taken away to slaughter—the child cannot blame her for what happens afterwards to it. So the reverence in which the baby animal holds its mother will be unblemished, even as the baby suffers and dies at human hands: up to the moment of death, the baby animal gets to fulfill the commandment "revere your mother and your father."

Now back to boiling a kid in its mother's milk: we are forced to see this hypothetical scene from the baby animal's point of view, because the kid is the only actor in that horrific tableau. The mother is gone, but her milk can be smelled and touched, and it means comfort, nurture, and a feeling toward her of which the word 'reverence' is a very pale reflection. Now it's clear why it is maximally cruel and unholy to use that substance to boil the kid. And we know from rules about giving animals Shabbat, and having animals share in mourning and atonement and punishment—that the Torah is for domestic animals too, albeit in a limited way. People may dominate them and slaughter them, but they must do it G-d-fearingly, and in such a way as to preserve basic social relations, *even among the cattle*.

So now let's review what basic social relation it is that we're talking about: to be clear, it is not a parent's unconditional love for a child. The Torah contains many instances, including the incitement-to-apostasy case we have just discussed, in which a parent is allowed not just to strike or reject an erring child, but actually to take his life. And our canonical Jewish stories are

replete with parents treating children unfairly, parents disowning children, parents cursing children, etc. There was never a commandment to Honor thy Children. Certainly the picture of a Messianic age includes, in the words of the prophet [Malachi 3:24], turning “the hearts of parents to children, and the hearts of children to their parents.” But for Jewish society to function, only the latter part is necessary—hearts of children to their parents, that’s all. Honor your father and your mother, and the rest should follow.

Even the restriction against child sacrifice can be looked at through this lens. Child sacrifice is bad because it degrades the innocent child’s ability and tendency to honor its parents. The Canaanites, Moses tells us—this is on page 1068 [Deut 21:31] —are so barbarous as to “offer up their sons and daughters in fire.” So Canaanite children, the ones who survive, must hate and fear their parents, not honor them. Since the Akedah, when G-d stayed the hand of Abraham, no innocent Jewish child should fear violence from her parents, thus removing one more obstacle to honor and reverence.

We can imagine the original inventor of monotheism, called not coincidentally Avraham *avinu*, living in his Hobbesian world, trying to come up with a few central axioms for a better life. He would see the fundamental asymmetry of the parent-child relationship, and he would codify only the child-parent part of it in a commandment later laid out as “Revere your mother and your father,” or “Honor your father and your mother.” He would hope that more good things would follow, including parents respecting, nurturing, and not vexing their children, but Abraham was in the business of axioms, not theorems or corollaries.

And then many followed Abraham to fill in the theorems and corollaries, some writing stories and some making laws. The writers of stories produced a set of legends that contained an astonishing omission—one that is astonishing only when compared to legends of other cultures. *Jewish literature contains no stories about matricide or parricide.* The whole range of bad human actions—rape, murder, cruelty, betrayal, incest—but no parent-killing. We’re only not-astonished at this lacuna because we see the world through Abraham-colored glasses. Take those glasses off for a moment, and note how other myths and legends include parent-killing as a matter of course. Since we’re contrasting Athens and Jerusalem, let’s take Ancient Greece: How did Zeus become the king of the gods? How did Oedipus become king of Thebes, or Theseus king of Athens? How did Orestes get the first trial by jury? Matricide or parricide, in every case. To be sure, Ancient Greek *poleis* had strong moral and legal strictures against killing parents, yet there the stories are, lurking in the group subconscious and indicating possibility. There is one counterexample from the Tanach, but it’s an exception that proves the rule: Sennacherib, the Assyrian king, is foiled in his siege of Jerusalem, then returns to Asshur and is promptly killed by his sons. Such is the fate of an arch-enemy who is also an arch-alien, someone who does not live or die by Abrahamic axioms.

Hence the law-maker's dilemma illustrated by Moses's conspicuously incomplete list of apostate family members that one ought to kill. To the Jews, parricide and matricide are quite literally unheard of, not even countenanced in the group subconscious of legend. Does Moses, as he codifies the laws of Abraham's religion, really want to break that silence and declare which is top priority when the two principles conflict—is it honoring parents, or is it killing apostates who happen to be parents? No, it turns out, he does not want to deal with that question; he'd rather punt, because the Abrahamic idea of honoring parents is utterly foundational, reflecting and reflected by the concept of the One Creator G-d as the parent of all. Honoring parents turns out to trump, or at least to counterbalance, Jewish continuity itself...unless you believe Rashi.

In his commentary to Re'eh, Rashi says parents *are* on the list of apostates whom it's OK to kill, by finding that the phrase *rayachah asher k'nafshechah* (second line of page 1070 [Deut 13:7]), which *Etz Chayim* translates as "your closest friend," actually means your father. Now while it's always dangerous to say that 'Judaism says this or that,' and recognizing that Judaism is a big, messy dialogue of conflicting voices, let's agree that Rashi's reading is wrong, from several standpoints. From a philological standpoint, it supposes that the Deuteronomy used that awkward circumlocution (*rayachah asher k'nafshechah*) for the word 'father.' But the briefest survey reveals no reluctance on the part of Deuteronomy's author to come straight out and say *av* when that two-letter word is called for. From a theological standpoint, killing your father probably does not count as honoring him. And from a literary standpoint, it ignores all the other textual cues to the proper child-parent relation that are salted throughout the Pentateuch, including the several we have discussed here.

So we can dismiss Rashi's reading as an anachronism: perhaps he's from a time when Judaism was under siege, and continuity seemed more important than honoring parents. And we are left with a very strong 'Judaism says' statement, validated by mounds of textual evidence: Judaism says to honor one's father and mother, and it does not say to kill them, not ever. One small step further, again supported by plenty of evidence: Children honoring their parents is a bedrock principle of Abrahamic monotheism. It's no wonder that *overt* opponents of Abrahamic monotheism take deliberate aim at that child-parent relation. A case in point is the USSR's glorification of Pavel Morozov, the 11-year-old martyr who turned in his father to the authorities for hoarding grain--Pavel Morozov, Hero of the Soviet Union! And you can spot *covert* opponents of Abrahamic monotheism, whatever religion they may claim to profess, by the same token. Cases in point from Africa today include the Lord's Resistance Army technique of having child recruits shoot their parents, and the recent incident in which a Boko Haram authority made a mother behead her child for blasphemy. Look at the willful desecration of the child-parent bond in these examples, and it is evident that the Lord's Resistance Army *cannot be Christian*, and Boko Haram *cannot be Muslim*. To be a follower of Abraham, to be an

Abrahamic monotheist, is to value the child-parent bond as the highest communal principle, allied to the oneness of G-d.

With that bedrock principle in mind, let's now return to that no-longer-surprisingly truncated list of dear ones you should stone if they counsel conversion. Putting parents on the kill list would violate a basic principle we get from our founder Abraham, so Moses won't do it. But Moses does something more. By writing the law this way, he also partially addresses an intrinsic paradox of every religion that claims a historical origin: namely, that on Independence Day, at that moment of inspiration when the religion was founded, the founder was himself by definition an apostate and an inciter to apostasy. So just as we don't spurn the stranger in our midst, because we were once strangers, and just as we don't exploit the slave, because we were once slaves, so we must spare an apostate or two from stoning, especially if they are our parents—in honor of our father Avram, the apostate from idolatry, and in reverence for his father, the life-long idolater Terah.

This in no way lessens the drama and dislocation, and the goodness and necessity, of Independence Days—of the inspired founding of new social norms by children, in despite of their parents. The world is and should be turned upside down, and everything we've known should be just swept away...and the rooms are all empty down at Frankie's Joint, and that highway, she's deserted, clear down to Breakers Point. Things will never, never be the same after such an Independence Day as occurred in that house in Haran. But through the dust and noise, through the conflict of ideas and emotions, and across eons of history, shines the reverence of an inspired child for his erring and fallible parent: Papa go to bed now, says Avram to Terah—it's getting late.